

In brief

Transplanted cells continue to function in Parkinson's patient:

Human embryonic brain cells transplanted into the brain of a 69 year old man with Parkinson's disease 10 years ago have survived and are releasing dopamine. The ability of the patient's brain cells to store dopamine on the transplanted side of the brain was restored to the same levels observed in healthy volunteers. In contrast, the non-transplanted side stored dopamine at only 12% of normal levels (*Nature Neuroscience* 1999;2:1137-40).

Illegal drug use declines in US teenagers:

A nationwide survey of more than 6500 teenagers aged 13 to 18 showed that the proportion saying that they had tried marijuana in the past year fell from 44% in 1997 to 41% in 1999. Six per cent of young people polled said that they had used inhalants, such as glue or solvents, at least once in the past month, down from 8% in 1997 and 1998. The proportion of teenagers who used cocaine or crack cocaine in the month before the survey was 3% and 2% respectively, down from 5% and 3% in 1998.

UK AIDS related deaths decrease:

The Public Health Laboratory Service has reported that about 30 000 adults are infected with HIV in the United Kingdom; about 10 000 of these are undiagnosed. The number of HIV related deaths annually in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland has dropped from 1236 in 1996 to 395 in 1998.

England's health secretary wants to overhaul NHS pay system:

The health secretary, Alan Milburn, wants to move towards generic health workers who are paid according to what they do rather than their job title.

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Oocytes matured in vitro achieve high pregnancy rates

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

A Canadian team has achieved high maturation and pregnancy rates with in vitro maturation of oocytes, simplifying the in vitro fertilisation procedure at the same time as reducing costs and avoiding the potential side effects associated with hormonal

treatments routinely used to stimulate ovulation.

The group, from McGill University and the Royal Victoria Hospital, both in Montreal, Canada, has reported encouraging results from 45 cycles of the new treatment in 40 women (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1999;341:1624-6). Among the 15 clinical pregnancies achieved so far, five women delivered seven healthy infants (including two sets of twins), four miscarried, and six are still pregnant, giving an overall success rate of 33%.

"What was particularly exciting was that two of the deliveries and one of the ongoing preg-

nancies were achieved in women who had failed to conceive after having had three cycles of in vitro fertilisation each," said a spokesman for the McGill Reproductive Centre at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

In an initial clinical trial of the technique, which included 25 cycles of treatment in 20 women with an average age of 36 years, 10 of the patients achieved clinical pregnancies, with two delivering successfully, including the world's first twin birth resulting from the in vitro maturation procedure (giving an overall success rate of 40%).

In this joint Canadian programme, patients are treated in a natural menstrual cycle without the need for ongoing hormonal treatment to stimulate the ovaries. Patients are given just one injection of the common fertility drug Profasi (chorionic gonadotrophin) before immature eggs are removed. Oocytes are generally retrieved between days 10 and 14 of the menstrual cycle and are matured for 24-48 hours, without freezing, in the laboratory. Once matured, they are fertilised, and the resulting embryos are transferred into the uterus. □



In vitro maturation of oocytes will simplify in vitro fertilisation

Drug company threatens legal action over Canadian guidelines

Miriam Shuchman *Toronto*

A pharmaceutical company has threatened legal action against an adviser to the Ontario Ministry of Health after taking issue with draft prescribing guidelines that she developed.

Anne Holbrook, a pharmacist and practising physician at the Centre for the Evaluation of Medicines at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, serves on several committees that make recommendations on prescribing issues. In 1997, Ontario's Ministry of Health asked her to lead a review of the drugs used to treat peptic ulcers and gastroesophageal reflux disease.

In their review, Dr Holbrook and a panel of experts concluded that all proton pump inhibitors were essentially equivalent and could be prescribed interchangeably.

Dr Holbrook sent out a draft of the panel's guidelines, requesting comments from every pharmaceutical company making drugs to treat these diseases. AstraZeneca, manufacturer of omeprazole, objected to the guidelines. The company did not accept the notion that its drug was interchangeable with other drugs "because we feel there's a potential patient safety health issue there," explained a company spokesman, Murray Brown.

A law firm representing AstraZeneca sent a letter to Dr Holbrook, which was marked urgent and addressed to her personally, arguing that the guidelines, due to be published next month, "if distributed, would be unlawful being contrary to [Canada's] Food and Drugs Act." The letter urged her "to refrain

from finalising and distributing" them. The letter concluded: "In the event that you proceed notwithstanding this warning you should assume that our client will take appropriate steps including the commencement of appropriate legal proceedings in order to protect its interests and to obtain compliance with the law."

Dr Holbrook found the letter threatening: "It sort of fortifies things that I've been reading about intimidation of researchers."

Her malpractice insurers have told her that doctors on advisory committees "are on their own." After seeing the letter, the provincial Ministry of Health wrote to the lawyers for AstraZeneca explaining that Dr Holbrook was acting as an adviser to government in compiling the guidelines. However, according to a recent editorial in the Canadian newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, the province has not said that it would represent Dr Holbrook or pay her legal fees if the company sues her. □